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Athens: Making up a fresh face for the world

By Kerin Hope

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Billboards and neon signs are disappearing from rooftops in central Athens and some of the city's finest neo-classical buildings are back on view, refurbished in their original colours of ochre and pink.

Much of a 2.5km pedestrian route, a broad paved walkway sweeping around the base of the Acropolis hill, is complete. Next year it will reach the Kerameikos cemetery, one of the city's most atmospheric archaeological sites with its marble sculptures of the wealthy Athenian dead.

The walkway will link six sites and monuments, enabling visitors to take a traffic-free stroll through Athens' classical past.

Elsewhere in the city's historic centre, four public squares are being renovated, trees planted and ramps installed for the disabled.

Next year's Athens Olympics have given a sense of urgency to the ponderously named Company for the Unification of the Archaeological Sites of Athens (EAXA) - a joint venture between the culture and public works ministries.

EAXA was set up with a 10-year mandate to upgrade central Athens and improve life for residents. Operated as a private company, it has spent €115m over the past six years on rehabilitation projects, working with architects, planners and archaeologists.

The priority is to refurbish as many building facades as possible in the run-up to the Olympic Games, especially on streets that will appear on television worldwide as a backdrop for sports events.

The walkway, partly financed with grants from the European Union, is EAXA's most ambitious project to date. But there are plans to expropriate and demolish buildings around Kerameikos - mostly former warehouses and workshops - to create a green space.

"We tend to be deeply unpopular with residents when we start a project because of the upheaval it brings and storeowners complain they're going to lose business. But when it's done, people are usually very pleased," says Giannis Kalandides, EAXA's president and chief executive.

EAXA has brought back to life a maze of narrow streets in the "commercial triangle" - a district of small shops - by extending pedestrian zones and planting trees that can flourish in near-permanent shade.

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Buildings in neo-classical style, the distinctive architecture of 19th century Athens, are first in line for rehabilitation. But Mr Kalandides is enthusiastic about preserving merchants' homes built in the 1920s and 1930s, with elaborate balconies and exterior decoration, and a number of box-like glass and concrete buildings from the 1960s.

But EAXA faces problems at two of the four public squares that were intended to be showpiece projects for the Olympics. A €2m redesign of Omonia square has outraged Athenians because of its austere layout, unrelieved by trees or comfortable seating, and may undergo a rapid makeover before next August.

Architects and archaeologists are bitterly divided over how to renovate Monastiraki square in Plaka, the oldest city district. The Central Archaeological Council, a body of senior experts that has the final say, has rejected a plan to use paving materials in a variety of designs, textures and colours.

Fotis Giannopoulos of EAXA says: "Time constraints are to blame. The architects should be able to experiment at length with paving materials in different lights and weather conditions to get it right. But there's huge pressure to get a project done so people can start using it."

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